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## The philosophical implications of Russian conceptualism

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## ABSTRACT

The formation of Russian postmodernist thought can be traced to the theoretical works of Andrei Siniavsky, in particular to his treatise “On Socialist Realism” (1959). Instead of praising socialist realism as the “truthful reflection of life” (as did official Soviet criticism), or condemning it as a “distortion of reality and poor ideologized art” (as did dissident and liberal Western criticism), Siniavsky suggested the artistic utilization of the signs and images of socialist realism, while introducing a playful distance from their ideological content. This project was realized in the 1970s and 1980s in the form of Sots-Art and Conceptualism, influential artistic and intellectual movements that transformed the Soviet ideological system into material for parody and pastiche, often characterized also by a lyrical and nostalgic attitude.

Conceptualism is not merely an artistic trend; its philosophical significance is revealed in the art and programmatic statements of Ilya Kabakov and Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid, in Alexander Zinoviev’s fiction, in Dmitry Prigov’s poetry, articles and manifestos, and in Boris Groys’s theoretical works. As a philosophy, Conceptualism presupposes that any system of thought is self-enclosed and has no correspondence with reality. The relationship between Conceptualism and Marxism is somewhat reminiscent of the dispute between nominalists (whose moderate version was also called “conceptualism”) and realists in the epoch of the Medieval scholastics: whereas Marxists assert the historical reality of such concepts as collectivism, equality, and freedom, Conceptualists demonstrate that all these notions are contingent on mental structures or derived from linguistic structures.

Therefore, from a Conceptualist standpoint, a “concept” is any idea—political, religious, moral—presented as an idea, without any reference to its real prototype or the possibility of realization. That is why Conceptualism, as a philosophy, is so strongly connected with art: the idea is used in its aesthetic capacity, as a verbal statement or visual projection of idea as such, so that all its factual or practical extensions are revealed as delusions. For example, conceptualists view totalitarian thinking, with its claims of all-encompassing truthfulness, as a kind of madness: a network of self-referential signs and internal consistencies forcefully imposed on external reality. When considering more properly philosophical ideas, Conceptualism creates parodies of metaphysical discourse, using, for example, Hegelian or Kantian rhetorical models for the description of such trivial objects as flies or garbage. This is not merely an attempt at the ironic deconstruction of traditional philosophy—it is also a project for the proliferation of new, multiple metaphysics, each of which

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consciously demonstrates the contingency of its central concept, be it Absolute Spirit in Hegel or a fly in Kabakov. Postmodernism is often criticized for its aestheticism and moral indifference, but Russian conceptualists emphasize the moral implications of metaphysical contingency, which undermines totalitarian and hegemonic discourse and promotes self-irony as a mode of humility.

Conceptualism identifies itself as a predominantly Russian-Soviet mode of thinking. In the West, the correlation between ideological signs and observable reality has been persistently validated through scientific and economic practice; while in Russia, traditionally, reality itself has been constructed from ideological signs generated by its ruling minds as a kind of hyper-reality. Thus, Russian Conceptualism sees itself not as a mere replica of Western postmodernism, but as a reflection of the underlying structures of Russian history, where the signs of reality have always been subject to ideological manipulation.

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In recent years the concept of postmodernism has often been deployed to explain the peculiarities of late Soviet and post-Soviet culture, such as the post-Utopian mentality, a critical attitude towards traditional notions of reality, and ironic playfulness with regard to the sign systems of various ideologies.<sup>1</sup> In Russia, the literary and artistic movement most directly related to Western postmodernism became famous under the name “conceptualism.” Initially, the name was borrowed from the Western artistic school founded in the late 1960s by Joseph Kosuth. Conceptual art from the very beginning was connected with philosophy and even claimed to be more genuinely philosophical than philosophy itself. “The twentieth century brought in a time which could be called ‘the end of philosophy and the beginning of art.’ [...] Art is itself philosophy made concrete” (Kosuth, 1991, pp. 14, 52). Two lines of argument intersect in this statement. On the one hand, 20th century art is no more limited to the creation of material forms but starts to question the very nature of art and redefine it with each specific work. Art, therefore, becomes an articulation of the ideas about art. “...‘Conceptual Art’ merely means a conceptual investigation of art” (Kosuth, 1991 p. 84). On the other hand, analytical philosophy, as Kosuth proposes, has refuted any claims of philosophy to enunciate the truth, to make veritable propositions about the world. Therefore, philosophy has lost its privileged “scientific” status; in “post-philosophical” age, its function passes to art which plays with signs and languages without any assumption of their credibility.

These two processes, the conceptualization of art and the aesthetization of philosophy, contribute together into their rapprochement and the redefinition of conceptual art as concrete philosophy. Instead of portraying a visible object, the conceptualist artist presents its verbal description, that is, a deliberately schematized generalization takes the place of a lifelike image. This device broke ground for metaphysical speculation about the nature of artistic reality as the mere projection of mental forms. Russian culture proved to be a fertile ground for the application of conceptualist theory, owing to the prevalence of ideological

schemes and stereotypes throughout its history, especially during the Soviet period.

Another source of the term “conceptualism,” less evident but perhaps more significant for the development of the movement in Russia, is the medieval philosophical school of the same name. Among the European scholastics of the 13th and 14th centuries, conceptualism functioned as a moderate version of nominalism, which asserted that all general ideas have their being not in reality itself but in the sphere of pure concepts. As such, this school was opposed to realism, which posited one continuum of physical and conceptual reality and insisted on ontological being of such universals as love, soul, goodness, etc. Strange as it may seem, an analogous confrontation of two intellectual trends occurred in the late Soviet period, with Marxism asserting the historical reality of such general ideas as “collectivism,” “equality,” “progress,” and conceptualism arguing the purely nominative and mental basis of such ideological constructions. Like its medieval counterpart, conceptualism attempts to expose the realistic fallacy that attributes objective existence to general or abstract ideas. This was the hidden assumption of the Soviet system: it gave the status of absolute reality to its own ideological pronouncements. Virtually every facet of Soviet life was dictated by ideological presuppositions about the nature of social reality, and conceptualism attempted to expose the contingent nature of such concepts by unmasking them as constructions proceeding from the human mind or generated by linguistic practices.

The Russian version of conceptualism, which flourished in the 1970s and 1980s, established a theoretical distance toward the multiplicity of discourses that dominated Soviet culture. From the start, conceptualism was not a purely artistic movement, but relied heavily on a philosophical foundation. Conceptualist poetry and visual art are theoretically self-conscious, presuming a premeditated and ironic attitude toward the language of ideas. Conceptualism might be called a meta-ideological approach to arts, or, meta-aesthetic approach to ideology, since it strives to reflect upon the hidden ideological apriorisms of consciousness and to verbalize or visualize them. Since ideological stereotyping unconsciously pre-conditions our thinking, conceptualists propose to undermine this process of indoctrination by revealing it to consciousness. In a sense, conceptualism worked as a psychoanalytic instrument for deconstructing the repressive Soviet superego. If psychoanalysis involves

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, “Symposium on Russian Postmodernism” (with Arkady Dragomoshchenko, Mikhail Epstein, Jerome McGann, Marjorie Perloff, Vitaly Chernetsky et al.), *Postmodern Culture*, University of North Carolina, January 1993, Vol. 3, No. 2; “Russian Critical Theory and Postmodernism” Forum, in *Slavic and East European Journal*, 1995, Vol. 39, No. 2 and Epstein (1995).

curing neuroses by bringing repressed impulses to the light of individual consciousness, the conceptualist project was an “ideo-analysis” which aimed to cure the trauma of ideological obsessions by bringing them to the awareness of the collective subject.

Many Russian thinkers in the conceptualist trend are not philosophers in the conventional sense; rather they are the members of an artistic school, or its interpreters, or both. In this they are radically different from all the traditional schools of thought which relied solely upon linguistic discourse for the presentation of ideas. With its visual component, conceptualism overcomes the long-standing affiliation between philosophy and literature in Russia, and also contrasts with the Western bias for philosophy couched almost exclusively in oral or written discourse. This conventional bias went unquestioned for centuries, but with the advent of conceptualism we are finally prompted to wonder: why is philosophy obliged to be verbal? Why cannot it take visual or gestural form? The presupposition of conceptual art is, simply, that art may be practiced in the medium of conceptions, or mental projections; is not this precisely what philosophy is as well? Conceptual artists do not so much deal with visual forms per se, as with visualizations of concepts that constitute a kind of philosophical discourse translated into a system of objects and presented as works of art.

On the other hand, conceptual art problematizes not only the linguistic bias of philosophy but also the visual bias of the arts. The basis of conceptualism is a critique of *pure representation*, in the Kantian sense. For Kant, an intelligible essence does not belong to the thing-in-itself but is imposed on it through the a priori schemes of consciousness. Similarly, the visual element in art can be understood as only a projection of constructive imagination – an interpretation that regards the visual realm generally as an extension of a concept, while the concept itself can supplement or substitute for a picture or an image. This was done literally in the early works of Western conceptualism, where, for example, an encyclopedia article describing a chair was presented as an artistic object along with the chair itself and its reproduction in painting (Joseph Kosuth’s “One and Three Chairs”, 1965, The Museum of Modern Art, New York). Traditionally, the visual component is privileged over the label, or verbal inscription, that accompanies and designates an autonomous work of art. In conceptual art, the textual component moves into the foreground; every visual work is conceived as an illustration of its label, of the artist’s textual creativity. At the same time, a conceptual work is not merely an artistic illustration of a text, like in a book, where the visual is dependent on and subordinate to the literary narrative, and reproduces the plot; in conceptual art, a text itself functions as a visual work or interacts independently and creatively with a visual image. Moreover, a conceptualist does not even need to create a new artifact to label and sign, but can affix a title or signature to an existing real-world object, thereby transforming it into a concept. Thus Russian conceptualist artists Komar and Melamid “signed” an earthquake that occurred in Germany and sent a telegram to the Chancellor notifying him that they were the authors of the event. This mode allows a conceptualist

to create concepts out of anything whatsoever, making this artistic practice a bona fide philosophical activity, inasmuch as it carries out the conceptualization of the world.

Conceptualist thinking reveals the futile aggressiveness of the human mind, which imposes its own ideological schemes on a reality that is inaccessible as such, and yet is continually pursued via a process of representational substitutions and innumerable references without verifiable referents. In this view, any attempt at mental coherency is essentially madness, if we define the latter as the state of consciousness isolated from reality. From the conceptualist standpoint, traditional philosophy, as the most rigorously coherent way of thinking, is closest to madness, with its solipsistic fixations on absolute ideas. The only way to distinguish philosophy from madness is the self-irony of the philosopher; thus, in conceptualism, irony takes the place occupied by truth or verification in more ambitious philosophical systems, like German idealism or logical positivism. The method for relating philosophy to reality now involves not the positive correspondence or identification of thoughts and objects, but the revelation of an inexorable and irreducible disjunction between them, a gap bridged only by self-referential and therefore self-ironic conceptualizations. Irony becomes the only possible form of truth for conceptual philosophy, inasmuch as it lacks any criteria for verification but has innumerable criteria for philosophical self-falsification.

Conceptualism offers a radical challenge to totalitarian claims of absolute truth, to the kind of ideological madness that prescribes ideas for the interpretation and transformation of reality. Russian conceptualism may be considered an ironic imitation and inversion of the solipsistic activity of the collective supermind, which not only is imprisoned by its allegiance to absolute ideas but turns society itself into a prison or lunatic asylum. Conceptualism, as it emerged in the West, remained a narrowly artistic device and had a more limited scope, since its substitution of concept for object proceeded from the visual art’s need for deeper self-reflection, without the implicit criticism of Western civilization as a whole. In Russia, conceptualism revealed much broader philosophical and critical potential, because it addressed an absolutely textualized and ideologized society and ironically reproduced the hidden patterns of this ideologization.

## 1. Andrei Sinyavsky

If a complete history of Russian conceptualism and postmodernism is ever written, then Andrei Siniavsky (born 1925) will definitely stand as one of its founders. Although Siniavsky himself does not use the term, generally preferring to disassociate himself from any established philosophical school, his writing has persistently taken a postmodern perspective, particularly as it tends to reinterpret classical models of socialist realism in the spirit of post-Utopian soc-art, or “socialist art.”<sup>2</sup> As one commentator puts it, “Sinyavsky

<sup>2</sup> This term was introduced by Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, see section of this chapter.

is philosophic but not a philosopher, he is building no system, inventing no new vocabulary. This places him in the mainstream of the Russian tradition, in which literature and philosophy are not, as a rule, entirely differentiated" (Lourie, 1975 p. 122).

Siniavsky's book, *On Socialist Realism*, published in Paris in 1959, offers an original interpretation of this artistic method, challenging both the official Soviet valorization of socialist realism and its sceptical reception in the West. Siniavsky exposes the inner contradiction of the method, which attempts to join a teleological element (socialism) with a scientific one (realism). Socialist realism is logically inclined towards classicism as an aesthetic model, with its orientation toward sublime and idealistic norms of discourse. The realistic component, which is alien to socialism, introduces an involuntary element of parody into Soviet art. "It is impossible, without falling into parody, to produce a positive hero in the style of full socialist realism and yet make him into a psychological portrait. In this way, we will get neither psychology nor hero" (Lourie, 1975 p. 92). Siniavsky himself would prefer both hero and parody. He is not only sensitive enough to grasp the inherently parodic element in socialist realism, but he goes so far as to advise the self-conscious exploitation of parody as an enhancement of Soviet heroic art. He regrets that the eclectic mixture of realism and classicism that was officially promoted from the 1930s through the 1950s lacks the genuinely phantasmagoric proportions capable of transforming dull, didactic imitations of life into inspirational imitations of didacticism and teleology itself.

For example, Siniavsky proposes that Stalin's death, if presented as a religious event, could have generated parodic effects and become a theme of great art. "We could have announced on the radio that he did not die but had risen to heaven, from which he continued to watch us, in silence, no words emerging from beneath the mystic mustache. His relics would have cured men struck by paralysis or possessed by demons. And children, before going to bed, would have kneeled by the window and addressed their prayers to the cold and shining stars of the Celestial Kremlin" (Lourie, 1975 p. 90). Such a transformation of socialist realism into a religio-parodic form was accomplished more than twenty years later in the conceptualist works, or *sots-art* of Komar and Melamid. The titles of many of their paintings – such as "Stalin and the Muses" and "View of the Kremlin in a Romantic Landscape" (both from the series, "Nostalgic Socialist Realism", 1981–1982) – suggest an implicit reference to Siniavsky's meta-socialist project.

Instead of condemning socialist realism as false, demagogic, or simply bad art, as was routinely done at that time in the West, or praising its truthful reflection of life, as in the Soviet Union, Siniavsky eliminates the criterion of truth altogether, reinterpreting this canon as a system of inter-related signs which may be used for artistic purposes – not because they refer to some knowable reality, but precisely because they escape it. He was among the first to formulate the principle of parody and pastiche (conscious eclecticism) as a new source for contemporary art and, he opened the

way for a highly innovative postmodern assimilation of socialist realism, which from the 1960s was generally considered a dead-end movement both in the West and in dissident circles within the USSR.

In later articles and in his book, *Soviet Civilization* (1988), Siniavsky continues his investigation of communism as a unique historical formation possessing its own unexplored, mystical depth. As compared with other researchers in this field, Siniavsky stresses the theatrical nature of the Soviet system, which was designed as a spectacle by the great directors Lenin and, especially, Stalin ("in his eyes he was the only actor-director on the stage of all Russia and all the world. In this sense, Stalin was a born artist" (Lourie, 1975 p. 98)).

## 2. Metaphysics of emptiness and garbage: Ilya Kabakov

Ilya Kabakov (born 1933) is one of the founders and chief proponents of Russian conceptualism. He is the author of many texts commenting on the contemporary situation in art and on general principles of conceptualist thinking.

Kabakov's thought is remarkable in that it focuses almost entirely on unique features of Soviet civilization and interprets them as general philosophical categories. The central category of his worldview might be called emptiness, or void, which he views as fundamental to Soviet reality. The qualities of "emptiness" and "vampirism" that Andrei Siniavsky identified in the national genius of Pushkin,<sup>3</sup> Kabakov ascribes to Russia itself, which he calls a "hole in space, in the world, in the fabric of being." Kabakov treats emptiness not merely as a lack of essential positive forms, a space waiting to be filled and organized; he presents the view that in Russia, unlike Western Europe, emptiness is a principle of destruction and disorganization which actively transforms all positive being into non-being. "By such ineradicable activeness, force and constancy, emptiness "lives," transforming being into its antithesis, destroying construction, mystifying reality, turning all into dust and emptiness. [...] Emptiness adheres to, merges with, sucks being. Its mighty, adhesive, nauseating anti-energy is taken from the transfer into itself, which like vampirism, it gleans and extracts from the existence surrounding it" (Kabakov, 1990 p. 54). If it is true that nature does not tolerate a vacuum, then in Russia the rule is inverted: a vacuum does not tolerate nature. One cannot interrogate emptiness for its causes and goals because its very nature is to annihilate such categories. "Why? What was the purpose? This question can be put only to the living, the intelligent, the natural, but not to emptiness. Emptiness is the other, antithetical side of any question" (Kabakov, 1990 p. 54). Because such emptiness is active, nothing can be erected in its midst without immediately falling prey to a vampirism that drains its soul away. In Kabakov's view, this existence bordering on non-existence, is characteristic of the entirety of Soviet civilization, whose

<sup>3</sup> "Emptiness is the contents of Pushkin. Without emptiness he would have been incomplete." Progulki s Pushkinym, in: Abram Tertz (Andrei Siniavsky). *Sobranie sochinenii* v. 2 tomakh. Moscow, SP "Start", 1992, v. 1, p. 373.



constructive endeavors are doomed by the very fact of their being founded in the metaphysical void.

In such an environment, all constructions implicitly contain their own undoing, giving rise to another important concept in Kabakov's thought, the "dump" or "garbage." Garbage is a metaphysical category, indicating the presence of nothingness within material things; it represents something that is simultaneously nothing. Moreover, every "something" is garbage-to-be. Although this fate is inevitable for every object, its historic manifestation is especially palpable in the Soviet Union. "...I feel that man, living in our region, is simply suffocating in his own life among the garbage since there is nowhere to take it, nowhere to sweep it out – we have lost the border between garbage and non-garbage space. Everything is covered up, littered with garbage – our homes, streets, cities. We have no place to discard all this – it remains near us" (Kabakov, 1989 pp. 45–46). Here the problem of garbage disposal is metaphysical rather than logistical: it is not that there is no dump, but that no space can be found that is not a dump. There is no transcendental realm where the garbage might be disposed of (hell), or where a process of purification might originate (heaven).

For Kabakov, however, the meaning of garbage is ambivalent. It is not just the negative aspect of physical existence, but is the core of existence itself, since reality reveals its transitoriness in the form of garbage. As the material integrity of a thing deteriorates, its sentimental value progressively grows. An object which loses its functionality – becoming garbage – is preserved on the level of pure meanings, in memory. Thus garbage is intrinsically more ideal and spiritual than those brand-new things that serve us by their material utility. On behalf of one of his characters, "the man who never threw anything away," Kabakov writes: "...[S]trange as it seems, I feel that it is precisely the garbage, that very dirt where important papers and simple scraps are mixed and unsorted, that comprises the genuine and only real fabric of my life, no matter how ridiculous and absurd it seems from the outside."<sup>4</sup> When things disclose their transitoriness and "nothingness," they also increase their value. Paradoxically, the dump is not only the cemetery for deceased things, but also the realm of their immortality, where they reveal their ultimate essence and meaning.

Many of Kabakov's exhibitions showcase items of garbage accompanied by elaborately descriptive labels that would seem more appropriate for objects of great esteem, like personal mementoes of celebrated historical figures. Kabakov's metaphysical dump is an inverted museum where the objects are of no great significance, as in conventional exhibitions, but rather the most miserable and negligible items from someone's personal life – such as a spent match, a shrivelled apple core, an old receipt, or a pencil with a broken tip. A metaphysical tension arises from the relationship between the negligible materiality of these objects and their monumental verbal presentations.

The relationship between reality and language is a crucial point in Kabakov's philosophy which concentrates on the peculiar Russian logocentrism, the love for verbal expression which remains strikingly indifferent to the world of objects. "Language is a fundamental principle, an aspect of thought; the world of the dump plunges it into a new state where the word is separate from the thought, the title separate from the object; the text is separate from its meaning, the appellation is separate from that which it names; in general, every word is divorced from its signification."<sup>5</sup> Given that Russia is the zone of active emptiness, which imbues everything with nothingness, the activity of language is the only thing that remains real, or to use Jean Baudrillard's term, "hyperreal," since it creates an illusory reality of significations without signifieds. Kabakov explores the language of such classical Russian authors as Gogol, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov, identifying them as predecessors of typical Soviet intoxication with words, phantasmagoric verbosity inherent in ideocratic society. In the characteristic propensity of these classics for excessive, self-referential speech Kabakov reveals a total loss of any object of communication. "But one must talk, speak out, speak again and again... And therein lies the reason for the neurosis in our great literature, in the minds and nerves and memories of each one of us – the neurosis of incessant talk, the preference for verbal self-realization, for the incessant, unflagging, raging sea of words..."<sup>6</sup>

These comments may remind us of Mikhail Bakhtin's valorization of dialogic language, but Kabakov offers a much less sympathetic interpretation of the same phenomenon. For Bakhtin, the dialogic relationship is the only genuine mode of human existence: addressing the other through language. For Kabakov, this obsession with dialogue bears witness to the lack of any relationship between words and a corresponding reality. People are eager to immerse themselves in verbal communication because they seek to keep nothingness at bay with magical incantations. But the very abundance of their chatter betrays the presence of nothingness all around them and intensifies their verbal neurosis. Bakhtin admires the multi-referentiality in the speech of Dostoevsky's characters, whose conversations play off of earlier conversations, themselves thickly imbedded with dialogic references. Kabakov sees this inclination for verbosity as a symptom of Russian's fear of emptiness and the implicit realization of its ubiquity. The speech of literary characters can only refer to other speech, because there is no reality beyond their words except for the void they try to drown out with their voices – a void that is only emphasized and augmented by the emptiness of their conversations.

Kabakov's analysis shows how Bakhtin's dialogical theory can be interpreted in a broader, conceptualist paradigm. For Bakhtin, to exist authentically means to communicate dialogically, which allows us to interpret

<sup>4</sup> Kabakov (1989 p. 44). Compare with Alexander Zinoviev's assessment of a dump: "Love your dump..., since it is your house, and you have and will have no other house." (*Zhivi*. Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1989, p. 17)

<sup>5</sup> On the Subject of the Local Language, in: Ilya Kabakov. *Zhizn' mukh. Das Leben der Fliegen. Life of Flies*. Kolnischer Kunstverein. Edition Cantz, 1992, p. 239.

<sup>6</sup> Epistemological Thirst, Ilya Kabakov. *Zhizn' mukh. Das Leben der Fliegen. Life of Flies*, p. 242.

Bakhtin himself as a Utopian thinker seeking an ultimate transcendence of human loneliness, alienation and objectification. Kabakov advances a postmodern perspective on this dialogical Utopia, revealing the illusory character of a paradise of communication by showing that its language is only a self-referential miasma emanating from and covering over reality's emptiness. Bakhtin's attempt to overcome monological solipsism is characteristic of an existentialist gesture of flight from objectivity, which inevitably falls into the even more absurd solipsism of dialogue enclosed in itself. For monologic subjectivity, there still remains the world of external objects, whereas for dialogic intersubjectivity which assimilates everything into the process of communication, remains nothing real except for words and their meanings.

A large part of Kabakov's work is dedicated to theorizing the phenomenon of Soviet totalitarianism. Arguing that the "rupture between word and meaning creates an empty space in which lives and thrives something that can be termed 'total ideology,'" <sup>7</sup> he identifies a peculiar ontological/linguistic premise for the dictatorship of ideas in recent Russian history. When there is no reality to which language can refer, language itself runs the danger of substituting for reality. Like God creating the universe from nothing by the force of the Word, ideology has the power to create a reality out of language only because it proceeds from nothingness. "The word, which has been cut off from and thrown out of the nest which was its meaning, can now signify anything, depending on the direction of the ideological wind. In practice this means that a whole world of substituted meanings comes into existence." <sup>8</sup> Ideology itself, in Kabakov's terms, may be defined as the illusion of reality produced by language in the absence of reality as such. This accounts for the grandiose enterprises and construction projects of the Soviet era that proceeded not from an economic basis but from abstract concepts and ideological assumptions, which ultimately led to phantasmagoric and utterly ineffective results. From this standpoint, ideology is linguocracy, the capacity of language to produce and impose on others a pseudo-reality that claims to be uniquely valid.

Strikingly, Kabakov defines conceptualism itself in nearly the same terms as he uses to describe ideology. First of all, he is careful to distinguish ideologically oriented Russian conceptualism from the aforementioned Western school of the same name, whose principle is "the idea instead of thing," or "one thing instead of another"; for example, the textual representation of a chair takes the place of its visual counterpart. The principle of Russian conceptualism might be phrased as "the idea instead of no thing," since the reality to which Western conceptual representations refer does not exist in Russia. Both principles operate by substitution, but while Western signs eventually refer back to reality, Russian signification borders only on emptiness. "This contiguity, closeness, touchingness, contact with nothing, emptiness,

makes up, we feel, the basic peculiarity of 'Russian conceptualism.'" <sup>9</sup>

Conceptualism, then, shares with ideology a tendency to substitute signs or concepts for real substance. But the principal difference between them is that ideology claims its signs have real referents, while conceptualism reveals the emptiness of its own signs. Ideology conceals its own contingency, pretending to integrate signs with reality in such a way as to declare itself "true" and "all-embracing." Conceptualism exposes this "realistic fallacy," discloses the contingency of all concepts and refuses to ground itself in any reality. "Precisely because of its self-referentiality and the lack of windows or a way out to something else, it is like something that hangs in the air, a self-reliant thing, like a fantastic construction, connected to nothing, with its roots in nothing." <sup>10</sup> Conceptualism emerged organically in the Soviet milieu precisely because it is the underside of total ideology. The reality presented by Soviet ideology existed as an elaborate façade, a huge and expensive movie set, and conceptualism invites us to walk behind the scenes, to recognize the spectral and absurd side of this monumental construction. Whereas totalitarianism must found itself in a monistic metaphysics of ideas that become real, conceptualism offers a series of imaginary metaphysics, which in their interplay demonstrate the relativity of each and undermine any metaphysical pretensions.

The proliferation of metaphysical systems within conceptualism is conceived as a way to overcome the metaphysical dimension of discourse, not by the means of serious analytical criticism (as in Wittgenstein or Derrida), but through the self-ironic, self-parodic construction of systems that deliberately disclose their own contingency. Traditionally, metaphysics bases all of reality on some general presupposition, a concept so broad as to allow all phenomena to be deduced from it. The Idea in Plato's system, Absolute Spirit in Hegel, Matter and Economic Production in Marx, Will in Schopenhauer, Life in Nietzsche, Creative Impetus in Bergson, Being in Heidegger are examples of such grand philosophical constructions. But if we recognize, as conceptualism does, that all of these are merely concepts, that none has a privileged claim to the real, then any concept we might choose becomes equally efficient for the production of an imaginary metaphysics. Hence Kabakov intentionally chooses small and trivial objects as foundations for metaphysical discourse in order to suggest a conceptualist alternative to the grand schemes of traditional metaphysics.

One of Kabakov's most developed examples proceeds from the ordinary housefly, which acquires in his work the same status as, for instance, Hegel's Absolute Spirit. "The work presented here, the treatise 'The Fly with Wings' almost visually demonstrates the nature of all philosophical discourse – at its base may lie a simple, uncomplicated and even nonsensical object – an ordinary fly, for example. But yet the very quality of the discourse does not suffer in the

<sup>7</sup> On the Subject of the Local Language, Ilya Kabakov. Zhizn' mukh. Das Leben der Fliegen. Life of Flies. p. 240.

<sup>8</sup> On the Subject of the Local Language, Ilya Kabakov. Zhizn' mukh. Das Leben der Fliegen. Life of Flies. p. 240.

<sup>9</sup> Conceptualism in Russia, Ilya Kabakov. Zhizn' mukh. Das Leben der Fliegen. Life of Flies. p. 247.

<sup>10</sup> Conceptualism in Russia, Ilya Kabakov. Zhizn' mukh. Das Leben der Fliegen. Life of Flies. p. 249.

least as a result of this. In this very way it is proven (and illustrated) that the idea of philosophizing and its goal consists not at all in the revelation of the original supposition (if this can turn out to be an ordinary fly), but rather in the very process of discourse, in the verbal frivolity itself, in the mutual suppositions of the beginnings and ends, in the flow of connections and representations of that very thing.”<sup>11</sup> Besides demonstrating the contingency of metaphysical systems, Kabakov accomplishes two other closely related philosophical tasks. By contrasting the superficiality of the topic with the gravity of his chosen genre, Kabakov not only deconstructs the methodology of serious philosophy, but elevates the trivial to the status of a topic worthy of philosophical meditation. Instead of promoting abstract concepts, Kabakov argues the merits of so humble a creature as the housefly as a principle of explanation of such important spheres as economics, politics, arts and civilization. The same device that allows him to deconstruct traditional philosophy, also serves to construct a new range of philosophies that can assimilate the words and concepts of ordinary language in all its infinite richness. This pan-philosophical approach can also be applied to such concepts as chair or table or wall, identifying them as potential universals that may provide a more vivid elucidation of the world than such traditional concepts as Life or Being.

Although Kabakov selects concrete universals that are much narrower in scope than traditional abstract founding concepts, such as Truth or Spirit, their specificity imparts an informational value that is lacking in the vagueness of more general terms. Thus Kabakov’s metaphysics of the fly appear to be more informative than the traditional all-inclusive metaphysics of Life or Spirit. In his commentary on Kabakov’s installation, “The Fly with Wings,” which contains the treatise “The Fly as a Subject and Basis for Philosophical Discourse,” Boris Groys, another conceptualist thinker, writes: “Our culture contains a small stock of words that lack a clear, firmly defined meaning. These words are, in a way, linguistic jokers which, without meaning anything in particular, are thereby able to mean practically anything. Specifically, they include ‘being,’ ‘life,’ and ‘thought.’ These words mean simultaneously everything and nothing – and are equally applicable to anything at all. For this reason they have traditionally enjoyed great prestige in culture. Kabakov transforms the word ‘fly’ into another of these joker-words which are potentially applicable to anything whatsoever...In the ability of an ephemeral word bereft of a noble philosophical tradition to achieve the lofty status of the words which possess this tradition we may see a historic opportunity which is also open to the fly – the opportunity to construct a fly-paradise of its own, its own world of platonic, fly-essences.”<sup>12</sup> Thus Kabakov’s multiple metaphysics presuppose the simultaneous double movement of a concept. An ordinary concept – like that of a fly – assumes metaphysical status, while metaphysical discourse is reduced to the genre of a speech game.

Kabakov’s general project brings philosophy out of its narrow discursive domain into the realm of ordinary speech and artistic creation. By broadening the definition of philosophy, Kabakov, more than any other contemporary thinker, responds to the uniquely Russian mode of philosophizing, which is not so much abstract thinking about the world as it is a concrete implementation of concepts in everyday life. Kabakov demonstrates the absurdity of an existence that submits completely to ideological designs. Conceptualism simultaneously discloses the contingent character of concepts and the conceptual character of reality. Kabakov had a powerful influence on many Russian artists, critics, and thinkers of the 1970s and 1980s, who continue to develop conceptual models derived from the historical tradition of Russia. “[O]ur local thinking, from the very beginning in fact, could have been called ‘conceptualism’.”<sup>13</sup>

### 3. The morality of eclecticism: Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid

Vitaly Komar (born 1943) and Alexander Melamid (born 1945) are the founders of “soc-art” (1972), a style related through nostalgia and parody to the official canon of Soviet art. Komar and Melamid’s own work is not limited to soc-art but proceeds from the diversity of ideological and mythological codes peculiar to both Russian and American “postcommunist” and “postmodern” societies. Like Ilya Kabakov, these artists supplement their visual work with programmatic discourse, proposing that certain ideas can function as self-sufficient works of art. What is it that distinguishes the idea-as-art from the idea as an element of ideological or philosophical system? Paradoxically, the art-idea is more quintessentially ideal than the idea imbedded in theoretical discourse, because it does not claim to transform reality as in ideology or to explain reality as in philosophy. Rather than weave itself into a tapestry of justification, clarification, argumentation, the art-idea presents itself purely as idea, idea as such. For the same reason, *conceptualism* establishes the concept as its basic unit, one that refers only to itself and not to external referent.

Komar and Melamid are sympathetic to Kierkegaard and Schlegel’s discussions of self-irony as the moving force of philosophical wisdom and religious ascension. By taking such a position, a conceptualist may interpret even the most ostensibly serious philosophical and theological systems as implicitly ironical. Following the soc-artistic mode of reasoning, Komar and Melamid reinterpret in terms of ironic nostalgia not only the Soviet ideocracy, but what they consider to be the first monuments of communist thought, Plato’s *Republic* and *Laws*. To the heated debate regarding the proto-totalitarian nature of Plato’s idealism, Komar and Melamid bring an unexpected twist: was not Plato joking? Referring to the conclusion of *The Republic*, they write:

<sup>11</sup> The Fly as a Subject and Basis for Philosophical Discourse. Introduction. In: Zhizn’ mukh. Das Leben der Fliegen. Life of Flies. p. 224.

<sup>12</sup> Boris Groys. We Shall Be Like Flies, Ilya Kabakov. Zhizn’ mukh. Das Leben der Fliegen. Life of Flies. pp. 212–213.

<sup>13</sup> Conceptualism in Russia, in: Ilya Kabakov. Zhizn’ mukh. Das Leben der Fliegen. Life of Flies, p. 249.



“The last thing that the story-teller hears as he is falling asleep is that one and the same person should be able to write both comedies and tragedies and that the person *who writes tragedies well will thus be a comedy-writer as well*. Plato’s remark compels one to suspect that his ideal state is the first anti-Utopia, a parody whose key has been lost in the darkness of the ages. One cannot help but sense a Socratic irony in the following contention of the “comedy-writers”: ‘We are even the creators of the most beautiful tragedy, if not possibly the very best. For our entire state system offers a reproduction of the most beautiful and best life; we contend that this is precisely what is the most veritable tragedy.’ (Laws, 817B).”<sup>14</sup>

Thus the entire conceptualist model extends itself to the very roots of those ideals and Utopias that inspired the formation of subsequent Western civilization. It is a commonly held opinion that the Soviet implementations of Marxist ideology distorted the purity of the communist project, engendering a farcical realization of Marx’s vision. But what if the farce preceded the vision? That is to say, what if the very concept of Utopia, as promulgated by Plato, was originally conceived as a joke, as an anti-Utopian fantasy? Then we could say that what became “Utopia” is the distortion of a primordial parody, a kind of anti-parody which approached in all seriousness what was meant to be taken as humor. Thus the Soviet implementation of Marx’s vision might well be understood as the perfect realization

of a misinterpretation – a joke that posterity failed to get. Komar and Melamid’s theory reverses the entire retrospective of Western civilization and, though it probably cannot be validated, at least bears witness to the potential scope of ironic reversals inherent in the conceptualist way of thinking.

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<sup>14</sup> Vitaly Komar & Aleksandr Melamid. *Death Poems. Manifesto of Eclecticism*. [New York]: Galerie Barbara Farber, 1988, p.111.